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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAMAKO 000623

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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: RFI REPORTED MALIAN ARMY SEIZURE OF ARMS AND DRUGS

Classified By: PolCouns Peter Newman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: Radio France International (RFI) reported on September 17 that the Malian Army seized arms and drugs from a three vehicle caravan heading across the Malian desert to Mauritania. The report was reprinted in a few Malian newspapers, however, not the official government newspaper, L'Essor. According to Embassy sources, this seizure never occurred, although it is possible a smugglers' caravan was waylaid either by rival Malian Arab smugglers or by members of the Malian Gendarmerie. End summary.

12. (U) On September 17 RFI and Agence France Press stringer Serge Daniel posted a report that Malian security forces intercepted several vehicles near the Mali-Mauritania border. RFI regional chief Christine Muratet clarified to PolCouns that Serge Daniel believed the Malian Army seized either arms or drugs from the smugglers. Daniel cited anonymous sources in the Malian security establishment. Malian press scarcely carried the story and it was not reprinted in the official government newspaper, L'Essor.

13. (C) PolCouns contacted a security official in the Ministry of Territorial Administration, who said there had been no seizures that week and no conflicts between smugglers, to the best of his knowledge. The security official made clear he checked with all the Malian Arab community leaders to confirm that no intercepts or seizures had been made. A Northern Malian source told PolCouns that the Malian Army has been holed up in Tessalit and has not made any significant manoeuvres in recent weeks. He also confirmed that no seizure was made. Embassy DAO has also confirmed with a Ministry of Defense contact that no such seizure took place.

14. (C) PolFSN also made several phone calls to contacts in Northern Mali, who said the Malian Army had not made any seizures. One source did mention a brief conflict between two groups of Malian Arab smugglers near the town of Eghabab, just west of Tessalit. The source stated that one group driving three vehicles transporting drugs was caught in an ambush by another group. Through negotiations the two groups came to an agreement without any lives lost and the caravan moved onward.

15. (C) A National Assembly Deputy - who is also an alleged smuggler - from Kidal Region recounted a similar story, however, in this case the three vehicle caravan had crossed from Mauritania into Mali carrying cocaine and arms. He stated the caravan belonged to a Telemsi Arab merchant, Mohamed ould Laghouinat. According to his version, a Malian National Guard patrol intercepted the caravan. After a brief discussion, Ould Laghouinat made a phone call to Bamako via satellite phone, after which the caravan was permitted to continue on its journey without loss of merchandise.

¶6. (C) Comment: It is entirely possible that several confrontations happened over the past two weeks and that all three stories - of an army intercept, a National Guard intercept, and a rival smugglers ambush - are correct. Unfortunately, it also appears that, contrary to the RFI report, no seizures were achieved. Furthermore, the lack of information provided by security officials combined with the story of a quick phone call to liberate ould Laghouinat's caravan hint at possible GOM officials' involvement in protecting/facilitating certain smugglers. End comment.
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